

Shared anxieties drive India–Japan defence ties upgrade



By Prof. Purnendra C. Jain

*SIA's Head of Research & Academic Development
Member of the SIA Advisory Board*

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Shared anxiety over growing strategic disruptions, terrorism and the possible rise of a regional hegemon has prompted India and Japan to deepen their defence and security ties as never before. Closer security and defence cooperation also symbolises strategic trust, shared vision on regional and international matters and commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

India and Japan held their first upgraded two-plus-two dialogue in Delhi on 30 November 2019 and issued a [joint statement](#) covering a wide range of security and defence matters. It was at the 2018 summit in Japan between Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe that the two prime ministers agreed to upgrade the existing two-plus-two dialogue from the officials to the ministerial level. This sends a clear signal of the two nations' commitment to further strengthening their defence and diplomatic ties.

This upgrade is a significant development in the bilateral defence and security relationship that has been [incrementally strengthened](#) over the years. For India, this is only its second two-plus-two after it formed one with the United States in 2018. But it is Japan's seventh such framework. The dialogue is all the more significant because it was held only a couple of weeks before the two prime ministers are due to meet in India for their annual summit in mid-December.

In the last decade, India and Japan have signed numerous security and defence-related agreements, beginning with the [joint declaration](#) on security cooperation in 2008. Defence chiefs of the two nations now visit each other regularly and hold talks on matters of mutual concern, alongside an annual defence ministerial dialogue.

India and Japan also conduct joint operational-level activities. The Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force and the Indian Army held their first bilateral exercise in 2018. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force and the Indian Air Force also conducted their first exercise, 'Shinyuu Maitri 18', in 2018. Each was held again in 2019 — making them annual drills. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy already conduct naval exercises known as the [Japan–India Maritime Exercise](#). And at the two-plus-two, both sides agreed to proceed with the first India–Japan joint fighter aircraft exercise in Japan.

India and Japan have also established staff exchanges between Japan's National Institute for Defence Studies and India's National Defence College, and between Japan's Self-Defense Force Staff Colleges and India's Defence Services Staff College. This further extends opportunities for bilateral interaction and training on defence and security matters.

High-level exchanges between Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency and India's Department of Defence Production are also in place with active interactions between the defence industries of the two countries. Further discussion between these two institutions is in progress to facilitate the entry of the Japanese defence industry into the Indian defence market.

For Japan, the Indian arms market could be quite lucrative as Tokyo loosened its past policy on arms exports in 2014. India has today emerged as the [second-largest buyer of](#)

arms following Saudi Arabia. Its appetite for arms consumption will continue to grow as it modernises its military in accordance with its emerging status.

But for Tokyo this may not be an easy path. Japan's bid to sell its submarines to Australia failed miserably while **long-standing negotiations with India** on the sale of US-2 search and rescue aircraft have stalled.

Japanese arms manufacturers have **little expertise** in negotiating arms deals overseas, as Japan's focus hitherto has been on the domestic market. Foreign buyers remain **hesitant** to buy from Japan since Japanese arms are not combat tested as most arms are used for defensive purposes only.

Notwithstanding hurdles and hesitations, India and Japan have signed agreements concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology and Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information. At the two-plus-two, the ministers agreed to accelerate negotiations on the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This would allow Japan and India's militaries to provide each other with supplies such as fuel and ammunition. If agreed, India will become Japan's first non-Western and sixth ACSA partner following the United States, United Kingdom, France, Canada and Australia.

India would like to further diversify its arms purchases beyond Russia, the United States, Israel, France and the United Kingdom. But there are significant hurdles to cross: Japan is quality conscious and India is price sensitive. India will also be looking at the transfer of technology and partnership in production under Modi's '**Make in India**' brand, which Japanese companies may not accept. Additionally, there is still a strong culture of pacifism in Japan and the majority of Japanese **do not favour arms exports**.

The two nations' emerging security and defence ties have led some to call them '**quasi-allies**' as they improve relations in the wake of China's rising economic and military muscle flexing. This is an exaggerated assessment of their emerging ties, even though India has officially been recognised as Japan's third-most important partner in security cooperation behind the United States and Australia, **replacing South Korea**.

While the first two-plus-two dialogue sends a strong message of India and Japan's growing defence ties, it remains to be seen how far the two nations are actually able to implement what is stated in official declarations. There are significant hurdles on both sides.

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